

Community plans are of utmost importance

By Mickey Williamson | Posted: Friday, February 7, 2014 6:00 am

I have been a landowner in this county for 16 years. I'm a committed participant on behalf of this land, this place, because I care about it and its people, and I want to see them treated with kindness and care. I joined the Calaveras Planning Coalition and the board of the Community Action Project because that's where I found people like me who were willing to step up, to learn and to speak on behalf of what they hold dear.

Because we came together as a coalition at the time the Calaveras County General Plan update was beginning, much of our time and attention has been directed to that process. We were there before the first community meetings hosted by the county and Mintier and Associates. We have been there for every set of meetings and every hearing and every study session. We have submitted volumes of comments, beginning with input for the background report. We have, in fact, been the constant in a vast sea of revolving planning directors, county administrative officers, supervisors and planning commissioners. Our website, calaverascap.com, may be the best source for the history of the General Plan process.

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, Brent Harrington, interim planning director, gave his update and recommendations to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors for the General Plan update. He asked that the county proceed with preparation of an environmental impact report for the plan and move toward its adoption. He recommended that the county do so without the inclusion of the community plans, proposing that they be adopted at a later date.

If we remember an important action taken by the Board of Supervisors in April of 2010, it is extremely short-sighted to approve any General Plan for the county without the inclusion of community plans. At that time, the board was presented with three alternatives for the land use map for the new General Plan. This is a key piece of the plan that designates land use categories for county lands, public and private, and projects future population growth. The board voted unanimously for Alternative B, community-centered development with moderate growth.

Centering new development around existing communities is consistent with the values expressed in all Calaveras communities during the General Plan workshops. It is economically wise since services can be more effectively delivered in a contained area. It preserves much of the county for open space and agriculture and maintains the beauty of our region. It is that beauty which is so valued by residents and visitors alike. It also minimizes travel and vehicle emissions since people live near stores, schools and services. And so, if communities are the places for development, then the plans for those communities just might be the most important part of a new General Plan.

The people in those communities have a crucial interest in how they will grow. They have stepped up to create visions and plans before and since the Board of Supervisors gave the go-ahead for communities to plan in August 2007. At that time the board agreed to several things:

- To have the Planning Department provide technical assistance to communities developing plans.
- Community plans completed prior to the initiation of the General Plan EIR would be included in the General Plan update.
- Further assistance would be provided if the county received grant funding.

The community of Valley Springs, given the OK to update its community plan, sought and received – with participation by the county – a Caltrans grant to craft a community plan. A comprehensive process generated a plan that was submitted to the county more than three years ago. The citizens of San Andreas worked over many years with community input to create the plan they submitted. A community plan process in Copperopolis has been ongoing for decades. All communities in District 2 created and submitted visions for development.

The county needs to honor its word to include community plans that have been completed prior to the initiation of the EIR. And I strongly believe, as Planning Commissioner Fawn McLaughlin said Jan. 28, that since it is the communities where development happens, it is the communities that should drive the General Plan.

Eight years and counting is a long time. But the delays in the General Plan update have come from the almost continual change in planning directors, staff and consultants, not from community planning activities. Those efforts of the heart, those hours citizens spent in meetings because their communities (and their county) are the homes that matters to them, should not be a waste. Community plans cannot be put off until after the General Plan update. Communities are the heart of our county and their plans should be the heart of the General Plan.

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http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_cd6ca462-8f9a-11e3-bbc0-0019bb2963f4.html